

Practicum Culmination Project

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Experiences in Power Structures

In Tatum's *The Complexity of Identity: "Who Am I?"*, the idea of us as multifaceted individuals who hold many identities is discussed (2000). Looking at my experiences using this lens, I can recognize the areas in which I hold privilege: my whiteness, everything that comes with growing up in spaces where others looked like me, and my upbringing in an Episcopal church with two parents in the house; at least until my mother died when I was seventeen. I also have to recognize the identities I hold that fall within the category of "otherness" that Tatum mentions: I am a genderqueer biromantic demisexual individual who is mentally ill, disabled, grew up in a family that filed for bankruptcy twice, and was forced to come to terms with what death is at nine years old. While my whiteness is the first thing that others notice about me, the identities I hold that make me feel so othered are the ones that I can never seem to get away from. This is the lens through which I experience the world. Within my higher education experience, I fought with pretty intense imposter syndrome both because of those identities and also how I began my time in college. Those identities are things I slowly started to come to terms with throughout my development throughout college.

To start at the beginning, I began my higher education journey as a 16-year-old high school junior. I took between 14 and 17 credit hours for four semesters as a high school student, and – even now as a graduate student – I struggled to see myself as an equal with my classmates after I graduated high school and started college as a "real" college student. I was attending a higher education institution that, while still considered a PWI, was more diverse than any other educational environment I had been in previously. This transition occurred at a point in my life where I was going through the first of many identity crises; where I did not know who or what I wanted to be. The ageism I experienced in those spaces was often self-inflicted, but nevertheless had lasting impacts on my development within higher education contexts. When I started taking on leadership roles within my jobs in orientation and our learning community programs, it became an internal battle that was just part of my experience. I both felt like I belonged and that

I was capable, and also felt like that high school student who was allowed in classes but not in student organizations or the residence halls. I still felt out of place, even if it was not something I always focused on.

This battle of trying to feel like I belonged started to get to a point where I could function without too much difficulty during my last year and a half of undergrad. I was a coordinator for our orientation programs and was our lead office assistant in the Office of First-Year & Student Transitions. Within those roles I had incredibly supportive supervisors who really took the time to let me sit in those feelings and work through them. They were always there when I needed them, and I never questioned the tasks they gave me because I knew that even if I was unsure, they were there to help me complete the project. I am an external processor and someone who needs external validation when those feelings of imposter syndrome start coming back. I always had someone in those spaces that I could process with. My hope as I move forward in my journey as a scholar practitioner, is to create spaces where my students also feel as though they can sit with whatever feelings they need to process.

Assistantship Struggles

This year has been a complete rollercoaster of emotions; mostly stress, though. I have been ‘weeble-wobbling’ (my sister’s phrase that feels as though it fits) along the line of burning out, but somehow I keep managing to pull myself back up just before I completely break down and burn out. There has been an incredible amount of responsibility placed on my shoulders with very limited guidance throughout the academic year. It is not anyone’s fault – something I sometimes have to remind myself – that everything that has been placed on my shoulders has been. We are short staffed and the entire staff we do have all started over the summer, so we have not been a team for a full year yet. This year was all about learning our jobs, developing an understanding of how the Department of Student Activities works, and making sure that the programming we are responsible for happens.

The most challenging part of this year, especially in my assistantship, has been those feelings of imposter syndrome creeping back in. My supervisor has been so busy that – because she feels I am more than capable – she just lets me go and do what my gut says. Sometimes we go several weeks without a one-on-one and there are often times where she has absolutely no idea what I have been working on. To some people, that kind of environment might work really well. I have the freedom to do what I want. My brain hates it. I want the additional structure, I want the time with my supervisor, and I need the space to externally process and have the backbone of support that I used to have. My confidence in myself has nose-dived significantly. Perhaps the next step is to more explicitly request accommodations, but that sounds like a problem to think about closer to August.

When I was looking for a practicum for the spring, I knew that I needed to find somewhere that I had a really supportive supervisor. I needed to have at least one space where I could work and process and find my confidence again. I was a little unsure about reaching out to orientation, because I knew that the staff would be new and there would be lots of changes within the program with a new director. I had seen a new director get intense pushback during my first summer with orientation, and I was hesitant given how much I was banking on a practicum and a new supervisor/mentor keeping me in the program. When I attended the NASPA Region I conference in November, I ran into a couple of folks who had worked with Erin at her previous institution, and they had nothing but positive things to say about her. When I arrived at my first meeting with her, I knew it was going to be okay and that this was going to be exactly what I needed to build my confidence back up.

Reflecting back on how it has gone and if there were elements that I would change if I could, I come up a bit blank. Despite the challenges and my struggle to remind myself that I am capable of doing good work, I am really proud of everything that I was able to accomplish in both my assistantship and my practicum. In my assistantship I learned how to supervise undergraduate students through trial by fire – made more intense in the fall when one of my

students showed up to table at the Involvement Fair in a lacy bra as their shirt. We ran seventy-two workshops, over a dozen professional development workshops, multiple team building and social bonding activities, and countless hours preparing for workshops and reviewing curriculum. I learned how to manage a budget with zero guidance (and a lot of Google) and how to make sure that everything was ‘stocked’ and prepared for each week’s workshops. I also coordinated six different scholarship selection committees, spent about a million hours fighting with our nomination system and downloading nomination materials, and coordinated a large-scale awards ceremony. I helped allocate and manage the \$24,000 worth of scholarships we gave out and spoke on a stage by myself (sixteen-year-old Ellie would never) and announced award winners.

To summarize, I did a lot of things that I never thought I would and I am very proud of myself despite the challenges. I cried a lot and very seriously considered running back to Ohio with my tail tucked between my legs. I questioned my decision to attend the University of Connecticut over the University of North Carolina Greensboro where I had worked with the supervisor before and would be working in first-year programs and orientation. The struggles I faced in my assistantship pushed me to my absolute limit and I wish that I thought there was something I could have changed or done differently. The circumstances just sucked, and quite frankly still do as we start a search for an assistant director of leadership for the third time. As I look to next year and the possibility of doing things differently, there just is not an option unless we get that assistant director position filled.

Reflection in the Program

One of the reasons I was very excited about UConn’s HESA program in particular is because it tries to put so much emphasis on social justice and diversity topics. As someone who is typically oppressed in spaces that are not fully accessible or where cisgender and heteronormative rhetoric reign free, I wanted to be able to feel more comfortable calling out all the ways in which our society – and higher education specifically – allow straight, white,

‘traditionally aged’ students to benefit the most and calling *in* those around me to try to make the spaces more just. I was hoping to get a better understanding of the ways in which I, as a HESA practitioner, could individually make change and make a difference at the levels in which I currently have access. Through reflecting within this program, I have learned how to name those identities in which I hold privilege and in which I experience oppression depending on the circumstances and the environments. I feel very confident recognizing identities and privilege at this point in my journey throughout the program.

Where I find myself continuing to struggle is with expanding my reflection and expanding practice beyond recognizing my privilege – if that makes sense. Everything has felt very theory heavy when it comes to socially just practices and ways of maneuvering in higher education spheres. We read all kinds of articles and book chapters on topics like plantation politics and land grant institutions, or faculty diversity rates. We are given lists of articles and told to pick one, but never really given additional contexts behind those readings and why we might want to read one over the other. In an ideal world, we read all of the above, but a graduate program does not offer the time nor the space for us to read every single thing when the list includes seven readings and we have two other classes.

Currently, I am struggling with finding the piece that can better allow me to put this theory and these ideas into practice. I am struggling to find those tangible steps. Readings like *Radical Honesty* by Bianca Williams and *Decolonizing Academic Spaces* by Tuitt & Stewart can help me find areas where I might be able to make change and push against societal structures, such as reviewing where the topics and structures of our workshop curriculum come from to decolonize our workshops. It does not feel as though it is enough – and that is where I struggle. There are only so many ways I can be entirely, radically honest with myself and others about who I am and the lens through which I view the world like Williams suggests when she explains the concept of radical honesty (Williams, 2016). I only have control over so much of the curriculum I review in my assistantship, and those nine-week workshops only make up so much

of students' experiences in college; so there is a limit to what I can do to decolonize those elements of my assistantship. While those things are not me standing idly by, I want to do more. I was hoping that this program – and reflection within it – might help me learn *how* to put these theories into practice.

Supervisory Relationships

The identity that I find myself still struggling to come to terms with the most is my identity as a disabled individual. In the summer of 2021, I received my diagnosis with a genetic muscular neuropathy that has a significant impact on my coordination, muscular system, circulation, and more. As I have slowly started to accept this identity, I find myself reflecting a lot – especially as it pertains to my experiences in this program – and then looking at where I am in my own developmental journey. When I look at Gibson's three-stage model for development of a disability identity from 2006, I find myself between stage two (realization) and stage three (acceptance) depending on the environment I am in and the circumstances of my presence there (Patton et al., 2016). In my personal life, I find myself more firmly in stage two where I have started to really see myself as disabled, but in that I also find myself hating that disability and pushing myself further to almost pretend that I am not disabled. As a supervisor of undergraduate students, I find myself more firmly within stage three. In the workplace, I am more willing to accept this identity and ready to allow myself to connect with other disabled students. As someone who is a mentor and works so directly with students, it feels as though it is not about me anymore. I can be more for my students.

In my role as a supervisor, I also see this identity showing up a lot when it comes to my policies and explanations. In the article, *When 'Rigor' Targets Disabled Students*, Guest Pryal (2022) discusses the ways in which the ableist pedagogy infiltrates the classroom and higher education structures through suspicion of ability, attendance practices, and responses to requests for accommodations. As someone who has experienced the moments in which rigor and the normative push to succeed negatively impacts students, my default has been to keep my

practice something that does not require ‘accommodation,’ but rather fights against the norms by being inclusive through a universal design approach. I keep my schedule flexible so I can meet my students where they are, I let them flex hours and work remotely when they need to, I emphasize taking care of themselves first, and I work hard to make sure they know that they can be their authentic selves with me because I see them as more than just students that are there to do a job. When I design our professional development trainings, I make sure that the materials are designed according to accessibility standards as a default. Fonts are larger, colors are carefully considered, activities are interactive and built around the ability of my students, and anything else I can think of to ensure their success on individualized levels.

As their supervisor, I am sure to recognize that even if I try to keep us on equal footing as human beings, there is still power present within our relationship. I can be accommodating of ability and understanding of the intersections of their identities. I can create environments where they feel safe and supported. At the end of the day, I will always still be their boss and responsible for approving their hours and making the final decisions for the workshops they facilitate. That power will always be present, so I focus on the things I can do that still foster those supportive environments and make sure that – while it is still there – the power present in those spaces does not become what rules the spaces.

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